DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 882 FL 801 163

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TITLE	Needs Assessment for Adult ESL Learners. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, Washington, DC.; National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-LE-97-02
PUB DATE	May 97
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	RR93002010
AVAILABLE FROM	NCLE, 1118 22nd Street N.W., Washington, DC 20037.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adult Basic Education; Adult Students; *Educational Needs; *English (Second Language); Evaluation Methods; *Literacy Education; *Needs Assessment; Second Language Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

A needs assessment for use with adult learners of English is a tool that examines, from the learner's perspective, what kinds of English, native language, and literacy skills the learner believes he has, literacy contexts in which the learner lives and works, what he wants and needs to know to function in those contexts, what he expects to gain from the instructional program, and what might need to be done in the native language or with the aid of an interpreter. It continues throughout the instructional program, serving several purposes: aiding administrator, teachers, and tutors with learner placement and in developing materials, curricula, skills assessments, teaching approaches, and teacher training; assuring a flexible, responsive curriculum; and providing both instructor and learner with information about what the learner brings to the course, what is accomplished during the course, and what the learner needs to know next. Needs assessment can take a variety of forms, including survey questionnaires, learner-compiled inventories of language and literacy use, learner interviews, review of reading materials, class discussion, personal or dialogue journals; or learner-prepared timelines. To be effective, assessment must be appropriate to the learner or group of learners. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ED 407 882

ERIC

Digest

National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Needs Assessment for Adult ESL Learners

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May 1997
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Needs Assessment for Adult ESL Learners

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Assessment of literacy needs from the learner's perspective is an important part of an instructional program. Learners come to adult English as a second language (ESL) literacy programs for diverse reasons. Although they may say they just want to "learn English," they frequently have very specific learning goals and needs: for example, to be able to read to their children, to get a job, or to become a citizen. If their needs are not met, they are more likely to drop out than to voice their dissatisfaction (Grant & Shank, 1993). The needs assessment process can be used as the basis for developing curricula and classroom practice that are responsive to these needs.

Although learner needs assessment encompasses both what learners know and can do (learner proficiencies) and what they want to learn and be able to do, this digest focuses on ways to determine what learners want or believe they need to learn. Many of the activities described can also include or lead to assessment of proficiencies, and many of the sources cited include both types of assessment. (See Burt & Keenan, 1995, for a discussion of assessment of what learners know.)

What is Needs Assessment?

The word "assess" comes from the Latin term "assidere," which means to "sit beside." Process-minded and participatory-oriented adult educators "sit beside" learners to learn about their proficiencies and backgrounds, educational goals, and expected outcomes, immersing themselves in the lives and views of their students (Auerbach, 1994).

A needs assessment for use with adult learners of English is a tool that examines, from the perspective of the learner, what kinds of English, native language, and literacy skills the learner already believes he or she has; the literacy contexts in which the learner lives and works; what the learner wants and needs to know to function in those contexts; what the learner expects to gain from the instructional program; and what might need to be done in the native language or with the aid of an interpreter. The needs assessment focuses and builds on learners' accomplishments and abilities rather than on deficits, allowing learners to articulate and display what they already know and can do (Auerbach, 1994; Holt, 1994).

Needs assessment is a continual process and takes place throughout the instructional program (Burnaby, 1989; Savage, 1993), thus influencing student placement, materials selection, curriculum design, and teaching approaches (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). As Burnaby (1989) noted, "The curriculum content and learning experiences to take place in class should be negotiated between learners, teacher, and coordinator at the beginning of the project and renegotiated regularly during the project" (p. 20). At the beginning of the program, needs assessment might be used to determine appropriate program types and course content; during the program, it assures that learner and program goals are being met and allows for necessary program changes; at the end of the program, it can be used for assessing progress and planning future directions for the learners and the program.

Why is Needs Assessment Important?

A needs assessment serves a number of purposes:

- It aids administrators, teachers, and tutors with learner placement and in developing materials, curricula, skills assessments, teaching approaches, and teacher training.
- It assures a flexible, responsive curriculum rather than a fixed, linear curriculum determined ahead of time by instructors.
- It provides information to the instructor and learner about what the learner brings to the course (if done at the beginning), what has been accomplished (if done during the course), and what the learner wants and needs to know next.

Factors that contribute to learner attrition in adult literacy programs include inappropriate placement and instructional materials and approaches that are not relevant to learners' needs and lives (Brod, 1995). When learners know that educators understand and want to address their needs and interests, they are motivated to continue in a program and to learn.

Assessment Tools

Needs assessments with ESL learners, as well as with those in adult basic education programs, can take a variety of forms, including survey questionnaires on which learners check areas of interest or need, open-ended interviews, or informal observations of performance. In order for needs assessment to be effective, tools and activities should be appropriate for the particular learner or groups of learners. For example, reading texts in English might be translated into the learners' native languages, read aloud by the teacher or an aide (in English or the native language), or represented pictorially. Types of needs assessment tools and activities include:

Survey questionnaires. Many types of questionnaires have been designed to determine learners' literacy needs. Frequently they consist of a list of topics, skills, or language and literacy uses. The learners indicate what they already know or want to know by checking in the appropriate column or box, or they may be asked to use a scale to rank the importance of each item. For beginning learners who do not read English, pictures depicting different literacy contexts (such as using a telephone, buying groceries, driving a car, and using transportation) can be shown, and learners can mark the contexts that apply to them. For example, using transportation could be represented by pictures of a bus, a subway, and a taxi. The list of questionnaire items can be prepared ahead of time by the teacher or generated by the students themselves through class discussion.

Learner-compiled inventories of language and literacy use. A more open-ended way to get the same information that surveys offer is to have learners keep lists of ways they use language and literacy and to update them periodically (McGrail & Schwartz, 1993).

Learner interviews. Interviews with learners, either one-on-one or in small groups, in their native language or in English, can provide valuable information about what learners know, what their interests are, and the ways they use or hope to use literacy.

Review of reading materials. An instructor can spread out a range of reading materials on the table (e.g., newspapers, magazines, children's books, comics, and greeting cards, and ask learners which they would like to read and whether they would like to work in class on any of them. A similar activity can be done with different types of writing.

Class discussions. Showing pictures of adults in various contexts, the teacher can ask, "What literacy skills does this person want to develop?" and have learners generate a list. The teacher then asks, "Why do you want to develop literacy skills?" Learners might be more willing to express their desires if they move from the impersonal to the personal in this way (Auerbach, 1994).

Personal or dialogue journals. Learners' journals—where they write freely about their activities, experiences, and plans—can be a rich source of information about their literacy needs (Peyton, 1993).

Timelines. Learners can prepare their own personal timelines, in writing or pictorially, that indicate major events in their lives as well as future goals. Discussion can then focus on how progress towards those goals can be met through the class (Santopietro, 1991).

Needs Assessment in One Adult ESL Program

The Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) in Arlington, Virginia periodically conducts a program-wide needs assessment to determine the interests and goals of ESL learners in the community. The director and program coordinators collaborate with community agencies, schools, and employers to identify ways in which the REEP program can prepare learners for the economic, civic, and family opportunities available in the community. This information is then used for program planning purposes, such as developing courses, curricula, and materials, and preparing needs assessment tools. Learner interviews and a placement test assessing general language proficiency are used to place learners in an instructional level. Once they are in the classroom, learners participate in a continual needs assessment process to plan what they want to learn and how they want to learn it.

In-class needs assessment is most successful when learners understand its purpose and are comfortable with each other. Because of this, the first curriculum unit in every new class is called "Getting Started" (Arlington Education and Employment Program, 1994). It enables learners to get to know one another through the needs assessment process as they acknowledge shared concerns and begin to build a community in the classroom (Van Duzer, 1995). For several days, some class time may be spent discussing where they use English, what they do with it, what problems they have encountered, and why they feel they need to improve their language skills and knowledge. Through this process, both the learners and the teacher become aware of the goals and needs represented in the class. A variety of level-appropriate techniques, like those mentioned above, are used to come to a concensus on the class instructional plan and to develop individual learning plans. Learners select from both program-established curricular units and from their identified needs. The needs assessment process serves as both a learning and information-gathering process as learners use critical thinking, negotiation, and problem-solving skills to reach this plan.

Once the class instructional plan is selected, ways are discussed to meet individual learner needs apart from the whole class such as through small in-class focus groups, working with a volunteer, time in the program's computer learning lab, assistance obtaining self-study materials, or referral to other programs. The class plan is revisited each time a unit is completed to remind the learners where they have been and where they are going and to enable the teacher to make changes or adjustments to content or instruction as new needs are uncovered.

Conclusion

Needs assessment can take many forms and can be carried out at different times during the instructional process. Whatever the focus and format, the basic purpose is to determine what learners want and need to learn. When curriculum content, materials, and teaching approaches match learners' perceived and actual needs, learner motivation and success are enhanced.

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